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GALILEE IN THE TIME OF CHRIST

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From whatever aspect we approach the study of Galilee, our conclusions have the most vital interest in so far as they cause us to picture this land when it became the home of him who is pre-eminently "The Man of Galilee." If anything can enable us to see what he saw, to be influenced as he must have been, or to reconstruct in our imagination the human life of him who is our example for all the ages, then our efforts are not in vain. We may also recall in passing that the same environment profoundly influenced the apostles and many members of the infant church.

In a previous article we dealt with the subject of the size of Galilee in the time of Christ. It was a small land, by no means so large as the natural boundaries would suggest. If we may judge from the description of Josephus,¹ the southern boundary was, for practical purposes, rather the northern than the southern edge of the great plain. The region described as "Lower Galilee" was all included, but the northern boundary traversed the mountain region on a line drawn from the deep Wady Hindaj (just south of Kades) on the east to the neighborhood of el Jish, and thence south along the line of Jebal Jermak till these mountains abut on Lower Galilee. All north and west of this line was Tyrian territory (as was Carmel on the southwest) with doubtless scattered Jewish communities here and there, like that we read of as existing at Caesarea Philippi. Although the mountain district of Safed belonged to the Galilee of Christ, yet we have no proof from the gospels that he ever visited this district.

The most striking thing about this region is the way it was hemmed in on all sides by hostile neighbors. How much the Jews hated these gentiles may be seen in the pages of Josephus where he describes how

¹ Xyloth (now Iksal) is mentioned by Josephus as on the boundary, and Gaba (now Sheikh Abriek) appears to have been a kind of frontier settlement at the western end of the plain.

they rose and massacred them all over the land. The Tyrians, as Josephus calls them—or, as they are called in the New Testament,² the Syrophenicians—lay in contact with Jewish Galilee all along the northern and western borders. Jewish villages for miles must have faced villages of an alien race and faith, and doubtless in all the larger urban resorts the followers of different faiths were then, as today, in little semi-hostile cliques. Ever present on the eastern frontier and invading the lowland in places, especially along the Jordan, were the nomadic *bedawin*. All along the southern frontier Galilee borders by an ill-defined boundary upon the territory of the unfriendly Samaritans. Besides the Semitic elements, many Greeks and thoroughly Grecized Syrians must have been distributed all over the land. Scythopolis and Gadara, both counted to Galilee in a loose kind of way, were two of the great cities of the Decapolis; here, and all along the eastern shores of the lake, Greek influence was widely diffused. At Tiberias was a newly erected city, pagan and predominantly Roman. In all the political machinery, in military organization and in much that makes for civilization, the Romans were much in evidence. Only perhaps in the quieter village life of such secluded places as Nazareth were Jewish ideals preserved more pure.

In such surroundings the Galileans appear to have developed marked characteristics of their own. It must be remembered that this region ceased to be Israelitish after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, and even as late as Maccabean times the settlers there were so few and ill-protected that Simon brought them all away for safety during his struggles with the heathen (I Macc. 5:21). It is surmised that it was resettled in the reign of Aristobulus I.³ Between that time and the days of Christ the Jewish inhabitants of Galilee must have flourished exceedingly, but under conditions which would encourage independence of character, resourcefulness and readiness to defend themselves and their property. Their comparatively small numbers, surrounded on all sides by hostile religions, would

² Mark 7:26.

³ If the suggestion of Schürer is correct that the Iturea conquered by that monarch was Galilee. It is quite probable that some proportion of the Galileans were proselytes from the non-Israelites of the district, but there is no reason to think the numbers from this source were large.

naturally make them tenacious of their own religious customs; while their isolation from Jerusalem would, one might expect, produce some differences in religious customs in the direction of less stress on minor points of detail. The history of Josephus and the references in talmudic literature to the Galilean Jews agree in showing that this was the case.

In order to picture the district it is necessary to form some idea of the density of the population. This has been a subject of considerable controversy. While it is impossible to give figures of any certainty, there are certain points which may guide us to some conclusion.

There is no question whatever that the population was considerably more than that of today. Galilee was a country of rich fertility and very highly cultivated;⁴ even today when so much is neglected no part of Palestine is more productive. Extensive tracts now given over entirely to brushwood or thistles might once again be converted into splendid groves of olives and figs; the terracing of the hills is everywhere neglected, the bare rock showing over miles of gentle slopes which once were vineyards and orchards. How suited is the land for vine-culture is shown today by the results obtained in the Jewish colonies around Safed. Something of the ancient fame⁵ of Galilee as a producer of olive oil is maintained down to modern times by the magnificent groves of what the natives call "Roman" olives near Rameh. The natural resources of the land have been previously referred to more in detail. But while allowing that the population was considerably greater than today, it is difficult to accept the numbers given by Josephus. In his works it is stated⁶ that in Galilee there were 204 cities and villages, and in another passage he says: "Moreover the cities lie here very thick; and the very many villages are everywhere so full of people by the richness of the soil that the very least of them contain above 15,000 inhabitants."⁷ Dr. Merrill in his well-known book, *Galilee in the Time of Christ*,⁸ argues that this statement may be literally correct and that Galilee actually contained a population of upward of three millions. To the great majority of those who have looked into the question the statements of Josephus are, as they stand, manifestly absurd. The

⁴ B. J., III, iii, 2.

⁵ B. J., II, xxi, 2; Deut. 33:34.

⁶ *Vita*, 45.

⁷ B. J., III, iii, 2.

⁸ P. 62.

numbers may be a wilful exaggeration, which, considering they were so easy of refutation, seems hardly possible; or the statement about the 15,000 is misplaced by an error in copying and ought to apply to the cities only. But in any case the statement, as it stands, is a precarious one on which to base any calculation of total population.

Galilee today is full of villages. One of 1,500 inhabitants is considered a very large one indeed, and some of the villages have as few as 50 adult inhabitants. The mean population of the thirty-nine villages of the Safed district, including all inhabited centers except Safed itself, is 280 or, counting in the young children not included in the census, about 500 inhabitants. The largest towns in the whole of Galilee, with the solitary exception of Safed (23,000 inhabitants) contain a smaller population than 15,000. But it may be argued that the villages of those days were very much larger. This is not the testimony of the existing ruins, mostly shapeless heaps of stones scattered all over the land. First, it may be noted that these ruins are most plentiful not in the district we are considering, but rather in the environs of Tyre. Secondly, it is evident that they belong to various ages; some to villages occupied *before* New Testament times, and not in the days of Christ (as may be proved by the pottery fragments); and others, a much larger number, are purely Arab remains from the centuries just before, during and after the Crusades. It has never been systematically done, but if the *khurbets* (i. e., the ruins) of Galilee were catalogued according to their antiquity, I believe—judging from those I have myself examined—that considerably less than half would show evidence of belonging to the period we are now considering.

When we come to the extent of these ruins a still more striking thing is noticeable. Very many of them are exceedingly small, representing indeed little but the ruined walls of a single group of buildings; and as a whole most of them cover an area about the same as that covered by a modern village of medium size. They are manifestly not the ruins of considerable towns. Were the statements in Josephus correct, we should find enormous areas of ruins covering acres. Such is the case in a few places, for example at Beisan (Scythopolis), Tiberias and Suffuriah (Sepphoris). Further, at the identified sites of many of the more important towns we see an area of ruin

quite consistent with the remains of large villages or small towns. Salamis, Bersabe (if at Abu Sheb'a), Kefr Anan, Cabul, Abela, Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida (Julias), Gischala, Simonias (Semunieh), cities in the sense we think of cities today, but from their frequent mention in Josephus, etc., these appear to have been some of the more important places and it is impossible that there were many sites now unoccupied as important as these.

The population of the whole as described in the Galilee volume of the *Palestine Exploration Memoirs* was, according to the estimates made at the time of the survey, 103,000. Today these numbers may with confidence be doubled.⁹ Allowing for young children not included in the government returns, the population of this large area of 1,341 square miles with its 312 towns and villages may with safety be estimated at about 250,000. This district is very much larger than that described as Galilee by Josephus which, at an outside estimate, could not have included more than 900 square miles. It includes the whole district of Tyre and all the coast to Carmel. The denseness of the population by the above estimates works out at 186 inhabitants to the square mile. The present mean population of the villages is about 500 and that of the towns Haifa, Akka, Nazareth, Safed and Tiberias about 13,000. I think the utmost we could allow is that the average population of the smaller towns and villages was double that of today, or, say, 1,000 inhabitants to each; while of the four really great cities of the district,¹⁰ Sepphoris, Tiberias, Tarichaea, and Scythopolis, a mean of 50,000 to each would I suppose be as much as we can believe probable in normal times (in times of war such

⁹ The following statistics collected from the Safed district make me believe it is safe to calculate that the population of Galilee has *more than doubled* in the last twenty-five years. The present population from the official figures in this district is 29,055 (5,594 Jews, 2,131 Greek Church or Greek Catholics—chiefly the latter—916 Maronite Christians, 1,536 Druzes, and 19,878 Moslems). These numbers, however, do not include a considerable number of foreign subjects, especially Jews, who may safely be reckoned as at least 5,000 more, making a total of 34,055 persons distributed over one city, Safed, and thirty-nine small towns and villages. The Palestine Exploration Fund estimate for the same area, counting up all the towns and villages; was 14,030, made up of 2,350 Christians, 1,600 Jews, 200 Druzes, 9,880 Moslems. Here again there are a great many foreign Jews omitted from the count—perhaps 1,500 is not too many, making the total 15,530 or a little less than half the present population.

¹⁰ *Vita*, 27.

towns being fortified would, of course, be temporarily much more crowded). If there be reckoned 200 small towns and villages with a population together of 200,000 and the four great cities with an equal population (200,000) we get 400,000 as the probable population of Galilee in the time of Christ, giving a density of population of about 440 to the square mile—six times the density of population by the old Palestine Exploration Fund estimates, and two and one-half times the density of population according to the most liberal recent estimates. It is inconceivable that the Galilee of the Jews could have included a population larger than this, and it is probable this estimate errs on the side of excess.

Among the villages of Galilee, Nazareth appears to have been one of the smaller; it is not important enough in size or situation to figure in any of the stirring events in the pages of Josephus, although its neighbor Japha is frequently mentioned. Where the ancient village stood it is impossible to say—none of the traditions are of value; but it cannot have been far from the one spring—the “Virgin’s fountain,” and must have nestled somewhere in the pretty valley shut out by its circle of hills from the rush and hurry of the busy life which pulsed on all its sides. Today a high road passes through Nazareth, but this is clearly not a natural route to anywhere. The ancient high roads passed from west to east, one along the foot of the Galilean hills to the south, and another through Sepphoris and the Battauf to the north. It is the sanctity of the spot alone which has dragged the mind out of its natural route to mount the steep hills of Nazareth. It was long the fashion to insist on the remoteness of the early home of Jesus, whilst later writers have rather emphasized opposite conditions and pictured his boyhood as within the busy arena of politicians, soldiers, merchants, and amid all the movements of that stirring time. Surely there is truth in both aspects. Nazareth itself was quietly secluded, shut off from the things of the world. It was not despised for any demerit, but was simply insignificant as compared with its famous neighbors.

At the same time, it was in the center of a district of teeming and strenuous life. Within sight of its surrounding hills rushed the eager tide of civilization. From these heights the eye could wander over scene after scene at once of Israel’s ancient history and of present

struggles. Southward spread the great plain with its memories of Deborah and Barak, of Gideon and Elijah, of Ahab and Jezebel, while beyond rose the mountains of those people of whom we hear so much in the gospels—the despised but feared Samaritans. The once sacred shrine, Mount Tabor—in Christ's time a fortified stronghold—was visible to the southeast, while southwest stretched the long line of Carmel from the lofty eastern end where, by tradition, Elijah championed the name of Jehovah before the prophets of Baal and all the hosts of backsliding Israel, to the further end which dips gently toward the misty sea to form the southern boundary of the great Bay of Akka. Here landed the legions of arrogant Rome, the ambitious soldier, the crafty politician, all those referred to in the sayings of Jesus as seeking “after all these things.”¹¹ To the north we see, fold after fold, the hills of lower Galilee. Almost at one's feet, but an hour's ride away, lay Sepphoris, the scene in those days of many an heroic deed, then soon to lose (though but temporarily) the distinction of being the capital city of the district in favor of the godless and degraded Tiberias. The land for sixteen miles around Sepphoris is reported in the Talmud to have “flowed with milk and honey.” Behind Sepphoris lay the mountains of esh Sheghur and the loftier crags of Upper Galilee, culminating in the Jebal Jermak range. To the northeast snowclad Hermon was visible, while due west the hills of the Nazareth range rose higher and shut off the view.

Nazareth was thus a secluded village in the midst of a Roman province of very considerable importance. But an hour's walk to the north was the capital and a great high road. Less than an hour to the south was another great road along which chariots, horsemen and armies hurried backward and forward. Within a very few miles were the important villages of Japha, Simónias, Gebatha and Bethlehem of Zebulon. It was surrounded on all sides by a busy, worldly life, with alien races, languages and customs. To the south were the Samaritans; Carmel, the whole coast plain, and the mountains to the northwest belonged to the Tyrians (Syrophenicians) enjoying self-government, while Hermon and much of the land to the east of the lake was pagan, Greek or Roman. When we consider that the youthful Jesus viewed these alien lands perhaps almost daily from the

¹¹ Matt. 6:32.

lofty hills above his home, what added interest it gives to his references to them: "If the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in dust and ashes."¹²

We cannot doubt that it was to the far-seen land across the Jordan, very fascinating to those viewing it from the west, that the prodigal son went when he went to a "far country," and there fed swine. With what prejudice must the people of Nazareth have looked across the great plain southward to the hills of those hereditary enemies of theirs, and yet how gentle and loving was this Nazarene in all his doings with them.¹³

Although we may not know the exact spot on which stood the village home of Jesus, there is very much in the village life, in the recurring seasons and in nature's gracious gifts which must be today as they were in the days when this was his earthly home. Thus every year the wondrous miracle of spring must have developed itself as it does today, and from the long and hard baked earth there emerged, under the influence of the gentle showers and genial sunshine, that marvelous carpet of green leaves and gorgeous flowers which makes spring in Palestine such a never-ending surprise and delight. Only those who have lived through the cold, wet, lifeless winter in Galilee can fully realize the unthinkable change which comes with the spring. First come the crocuses on the level fields and the cyclamen in the rocky crevices, each putting forth its early flowers from the bulbs of stored-up nourishment; then the anemones—scarlet, purple, white—the gladioli, the purple irises, the pink and yellow flaxes, the crumpled-leaved cistus, and the ubiquitous primrose-tinted Palestinian scabious. It is difficult to believe that, in spite of a much higher cultivation, these beauties of nature were absent. Indeed, it is surely to them that our Lord refers when he says "consider the lilies of the field how they grow."¹⁴ A little later in the spring, miles of hillside and valley are waving with grain, and the great plain in particular is green almost from end to end. The fig trees now shoot forth their delicate green leaves and tiny figs; the pomegranates deck out their soberer green with brilliant scarlet

¹² Luke 10:13.

¹³ Luke 9:56; 10:33; 17:16; John 4:7-42.

¹⁴ Matt. 6:28-30.

blossoms; the foliage of the grapes appears—all signs that the winter is past and the summer is near at hand.¹⁵ The hilltops are covered by the flocks of sheep and goats, while all the valleys re-echo to the shepherds' pipes.

As summer advances and the green blades of the grain arise, groups of women and girls go forth and root out the weeds and tares¹⁶ from among the ripening wheat. A few weeks more and the camels, loaded high with wheat and barley, pour into Nazareth from the plain, until the village threshing-floor is covered thick with piled up bundles. Now come the weeks of threshing when the horses, donkeys, and cattle by long stamping reduce the heaps to the homogeneous mass of broken stalks (*tibn*) and grain. Then with the late summer breezes come the long afternoons of winnowing, when the light and worthless chaff is blown away and the precious grain is gathered in an ever growing pile to be garnered—after washing and drying—into the granaries; while the surplus chaff is burnt up.¹⁷

And now the families go out into the fig gardens and vineyards and watch the ripening fruit until, just before the rains, these too are gathered in. As the days grow shorter, and the winds cooler, the stubble is burned off the fields, great blazing fires being visible on the hillsides far away. At last the winter's rains descend and the sudden floods sweep down the long dry valley bottom.¹⁸ Now the peasant goes out with his plow upon his shoulder to furrow the softened earth; and with him goes the sower, sometimes scattering the seeds broadcast before the plow, as in the parable,¹⁹ at other times following behind it and laying it in the newly turned furrows. The gathering of brushwood from the thickets for fuel and the beating-down of the olives are occupations of the early winter, and bring the agricultural year to a close.

Such are some of the scenes amid which, from year to year, Jesus moved. The man who planted the vineyard,²⁰ the shepherd who went to seek his lost sheep,²¹ the husbandman who spared for one year more his fruitless fig tree,²² the woman who lost her piece of

¹⁵ Cant. 2:11; Luke 21:30.

¹⁶ Cf. Matt. 13:41.

¹⁷ Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17; Isa. 5:24.

¹⁸ The floods of the parable, Matt. 7:25.

¹⁹ Matt. 13:3, etc.

²⁰ Matt. 21:33, etc.

²¹ Luke 15:4.

²² Luke 13:6.

money²³ (possibly from her head-dress)—may not these and such parables have been founded upon actual incidents in Jesus' boyhood life? All his teaching bears the impress of this village life, though occasionally there comes also an echo of wider interests, as in the parables of the marriage of the king's son,²⁴ the ten talents,²⁵ the unjust steward,²⁶ and the king going to war.²⁷

While nature provided Jesus with such abundant illustrations, the climate made possible a mode of life for his ministry only practicable in such a land. Days of unbroken sunshine and nights of pleasant warmth can be counted upon for six or seven months every year; it is possible, without fear of rain, to gather crowds on the hillsides day and night all over the district. The moonlight nights are perfect for rest out of doors; or, if the days are oppressively hot, for travel. Never was a land more suited for itinerant work and open-air preaching. Even in midwinter it is no uncommon thing to have six weeks of sunshine without a shower. The conditions of peasant life in the east, though hard in many ways, leave much spare time, especially between sowing and harvest, for leisure and thought; food is cheap and wants are few; what is not done today can often be equally well done tomorrow. Certainly the modern *jellah* finds plenty of time for sitting about, particularly in the winter, though working night and day in times of stress.

Today, as then, the sick are everywhere—the fever-stricken, the blind or semi-blind, the epileptic (now as then supposed to be “possessed”), the dumb because deaf, the palsied (withered hands and feet), and the leprous. It is sufficient for it to be known in any village that a *hakim* is there for every lane to disgorge just such a crowd as that which, ever renewed, followed the footsteps of our Master. The *ashshur* (tax-farmer) is as ubiquitous and as hated as of old. It is a saying in Galilee that if you would rid yourself of ants it is enough to sprinkle on their holes some of the earth on which an *ashshur* has stood—contact with anything so vile will drive even the ants precipitately away.

There is indeed much in the Galilee of today to remind us of that of eighteen hundred years ago. The Jews, though few in number,

²³ Luke 15:8.

²⁵ Matt. 25:14.

²⁷ Luke 14:16.

²⁴ Matt. 22:2.

²⁶ Luke 16:1-13.

are scattered over very much the same area as then; they are very similar in religious ideas; "they tithe mint and anise and cummin," but omit the weightier matters. They are oppressed and overtaxed by a power whose yoke is too heavy for them to throw off, but they cannot forget that they were once a nation and a smoldering idea of nationalism has taken possession of many. They are divided into at least two parties: (1) those who, like the Pharisees of the New Testament, hold firm to the letter of the law, and believe little in human effort in any direction except talmudic study; and (2) the newer party, chiefly colonists, to whom the idea of nationalization appeals rather than a dreamy religious idealism centered around a (to them) very doubtful interpretation of prophecy. While the former are frequently lazy, ill-developed and of low vitality, the latter are usually fine, sturdy men and women who are raising up a race of indigenous Israelites on the soil of their forefathers of a type long foreign to Palestine; they are the hope of Zionism.

Galilee, though small in size and comparatively unimportant in the world's history, was for a few short years honored forever above all lands by having been the dwelling-place of him who is the Teacher for all who would know the road to the Father, the Master who claims the allegiance of all hearts. At Nazareth he passed his obscure years of preparation and development. On the shores of that strange lake more than six hundred feet below sea level, he gathered out—almost exclusively from the dwellers in the district—those who, as his earliest followers, are destined to be famous while this world lasts.

Although the Christian church in this sense took rise here, it cannot be said that Christianity has ever flourished much on the land of its birth. The early Christian centuries witnessed the rise in Galilee of a predominant and powerful rabbinism. And later, when Christianity became the religion of the district, its reign was short-lived, for in the seventh century it was on account of its corruption swept away by the conquering armies of the Arabian prophets. A few centuries later a militant, though essentially false, Christianity, for a few brief years triumphant, was humbled to the dust at the battle of Hattin, between Nazareth and the Lake. Since that time a night of ignorance and obscurity has descended upon the land, and even the name of Christ has been hardly known.

The Galilee of the present is only now emerging from the long blight of ignorance, neglect, and internal discord. Much of the land is still desolate, its fields and orchards neglected, its people ignorant of any vital religion and most of all of the teachings of Him on whose account the eyes of half the civilized world turn in imagination to their home. But on all sides there are signs of awakening. The railway from Haifa to Damascus, which traverses the plain of Esdraelon and touches the Lake at its southern end, the little steamboat on the Lake, the rapidly increasing carriage traffic, the prosperous German and Jewish colonies scattered all over the land, all carry promise of improvement in material things. Many of the *jellahin* are migrating to America, of whom a good proportion will return with enlarged ideas and a certain amount of capital. The immigrant Jews from all lands, especially the reformed Jews, connected with the Zionist movement, are introducing many improvements in agriculture and new industries. Schools are multiplying all over the land, and many scores of the more intelligent youths of all religions are now being educated in the first-class Christian educational establishments of Beirut and Jerusalem. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth once again "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have the gospel preached to them." It is in his name that all over the land healing and relief of suffering is meted out to Moslem, Jew, and Christian alike by loving hands.²⁸ We can surely with confidence believe that as day by day the sun rises in splendor behind the dark hills of Bashan and floods lake and valley and mountain side, each return brings nearer the dawn of a better era for this land where once again He, for whose sake the land is ever dear, will here too be honored above all others in a purer, more intelligent and more devoted way than ever in the past.

²⁸ Particularly at the medical missions at Haifa, Akka, Nazareth, Tiberias, and Safed.